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John 21:1-19

After these things Jesus showed himself again to the disciples by the Sea of Tiberias; and he showed himself in this way. Gathered there together were Simon Peter, Thomas called the Twin, Nathanael of Cana in Galilee, the sons of Zebedee, and two others of his disciples. Simon Peter said to them, "I am going fishing." They said to him, "We will go with you." They went out and got into the boat, but that night they caught nothing. Just after daybreak, Jesus stood on the beach; but the disciples did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to them, "Children, you have no fish, have you?" They answered him, "No." He said to them, "Cast the net to the right side of the boat, and you will find some." So they cast it, and now they were not able to haul it in because there were so many fish. That disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, "It is the Lord!" When Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord, he put on some clothes, for he was naked, and jumped into the sea. But the other disciples came in the boat, dragging the net full of fish, for they were not far from the land, only about a hundred yards off. When they had gone ashore, they saw a charcoal fire there, with fish on it, and bread. Jesus said to them, "Bring some of the fish that you have just caught." So Simon Peter went aboard and hauled the net ashore, full of large fish, a hundred fifty-three of them; and though there were so many, the net was not torn. Jesus said to them, "Come and have breakfast." Now none of the disciples dared to ask him, "Who are you?" because they knew it was the Lord. Jesus came and took the bread and gave it to them, and did the same with the fish.

This was now the third time that Jesus appeared to the disciples after he was raised from the dead.

Let's set the scene again in this morning's passage. We're now a few days after the empty tomb. Jesus has appeared to Mary and the other women, and then startled his followers by appearing where they gathered. During last week's worship service we empathized with Thomas and his need to see the wounds, trying to imagine what it must have been like for the disciples to see their movement broken into pieces, yet hoping that through a miraculous resurrection they might be put back together.

The disciples are still trying to find meaning in this new moment in which they find themselves. Their hopes for a messiah to come in and crush the Roman powers has not quite come to fruition, but instead they've experienced something more moving and miraculous. What do they make of this new reality which did not go quite as planned?

John's Gospel, which Ben read so well, shows us that they decided they needed space to clear their heads. So what do former fishermen do when they need space? They head to the sea, to go and fish. Perhaps they needed some fresh air, or perhaps they longed to feel the physicality of using muscles instead of racking their brains. They fish, and fish, and fish, but catch nothing. Just like their expectations with the coming messiah, their fishing endeavor does not turn out as expected.

This year Easter Season coincides with the beginning of the baseball season, so of course, my mind immediately goes to baseball metaphors, so bear with me, and I apologize in advance to those of you who find baseball boring and tiresome.

If you followed baseball over the last 20 years, you may remember the name Rick Ankiel. Ankiel rose to fame as a high school pitcher, being named the high school player of the year by USA today, before being drafted by the St. Louis Cardinals in 1997. He made his Major League debut at the surprisingly young age of just 19, and pitched quite well during the following season almost winning the Rookie of the Year award. The Cardinals made the playoffs during that year, and Ankiel was picked to start their playoff series against the mighty Atlanta Braves, facing off against future Hall of Famer, Greg Maddux.

For Cardinal fans, I imagine they felt a lot of hope in that moment. Their young star pitcher, leading the team into the playoffs. Yet despite the team taking an early 6-0 lead, things didn't quite go as planned. Here's some video footage of that moment ...

VIDEO

Ankiel wound up allowing four runs on two hits, four walks and five wild pitches before being removed from the game. After the game, which the Cardinals somehow held on to win, he brushed it off as no big deal, suggesting he would now be in the record books for the most wild pitches in an inning. Unfortunately his next game was just as bad. He was pulled during the first inning after throwing 20 pitches - five of which went past the catcher. He pitched once more during the playoffs, and again could not seem to find the catcher's mitt. After such a rapid rise and impressive performance, Ankiel had seemingly lost it. Despite spending the majority of his life planning to become one of the best pitchers in baseball, he could no longer get the baseball to do what he wanted. Baseball calls this getting the yips. A sudden inability for the mind to connect with the body. When something that has come so naturally suddenly disappears. Ankiel's vessel had shattered. Something he knew to be certain - his ability to throw well - had broken apart into pieces.

After a rough start to the following season, Rick Ankiel, just like the disciples who expected one thing but experienced another, needed to clear his head. He was demoted to the upper levels of the minor leagues, but his struggles continued, so he was dropped all the way down to the lowest levels of baseball. Think lower than our local State College Spikes.

A few weeks ago, Jonas spent an afternoon creating wonderful little characters out of clay. After his creations were made, we had some discussions about whether the clay was air-dry clay, or if it needed to be baked. There were some different opinions among the kids about what kind of clay it was, but since we lacked the original packaging a decision had to be made. As the wise parent, I decided it would be best to bake the clay. But after only a few minutes Jonas peeked inside the toaster oven only to discover that all of his beautiful creations had melted into a pool of multi-colored clay.

He was crushed, and I felt soooo bad. He had poured so much of himself into creating these things, and now they were ruined. As we began the tedious process of cleaning up, we remarked at how interesting the swirly patterns were in the clay. Jonas got his hands in the mixture and realized that it was actually pretty fun to play with warm soft multi-colored clay. It wasn't quite what he had expected, but all of a sudden something special and transformative had emerged after his heartbreak moment.

Common sense would have said that it was time for Rick Ankiel to move on to a new career. He had trained his life to do one thing extremely well, and could no longer do that thing for which he trained. Logic says he got his chance and that chance was over.

And yet for some reason he kept going. Through the help and support of those around him, he began to consider the possibility that he might try something unexpected. As part of putting the pieces of his career back together, he decided to try and get back to the major leagues as an outfielder and hitter instead of a pitcher. As unlikely as this trajectory

seemed at the time, Ankiel surprised everyone, becoming a power hitter with incredible defensive ability. As a pitcher he had lost the ability to throw the ball to the correct spot, and yet as an outfielder he was known for throwing runners out with pinpoint precision. In his first game back he did this...

VIDEO

Talk about making something beautiful out of brokenness.

Back to the disciples, who had every right to call it a day and steer the boat to shore. A mysterious man appears on shore who asks if they've caught any fish. When learning of their empty nets, he tells them to throw their nets on the other side of their boat. Our scripture jumps right to the decision to do so, but I imagine that the timeline was a bit more dragged out. Can you imagine a bunch of men with fishing experience listening to some guy shouting from shore? I imagine their first response was to roll their eyes, or perhaps ignore the voice from the shore. After all, fish do not swim only on certain sides of boats. If there are no fish on one side, logic would tell us that there are no fish on the other. Perhaps Jesus was persistent, and in their frustration they decided they would humor him, you know, just to shut him up. They put their heads together and decide as a collective, as a group, to cast their nets on the other side. And miracle of miracles, against all odds, their nets are suddenly full of fish.

On Palm Sunday we talked about the strange and wonderful ways that Jesus takes our expectations and transforms them. On Easter we marveled at the strange sacrificial messiah who found life after death. Last week we empathized with Thomas and his need to see the wounds, and turned to the beauty in brokenness of the Kintsugi artform.

These moments of transformation are not easy. And culturally I'm afraid that sometimes we assume that these transformations are discovered through individual accomplishments and commitment against all odds. Yet

if we suggest this, we fail to recognize the community of faith present in the Spirit's movement. Jonas and I needed each other to be open to what might come next. Rick Ankiel needed his coaches, friends, and family to help determine what his next steps might be. The disciples needed each other to be open to whether to listen to this voice.

We need our community to affirm the Spirit's voice and movement in our midst - especially when we hit a wall and are in need of some significant transformation.

I love that beyond their miracle of the loaded nets, the disciples gather for a meal to reflect. They share time and space with Jesus, savoring this moment in their lives. They started the day needing space to clear their heads, and then find themselves rebuilt and reformed again, in a space to savor and reflect.

As Pastor Kate explained last week, when rebuilding broken pottery, she needs space to make sure the puzzle is put back together in the best way. It does not make sense to move quickly or impulsively, but is best when she slows down enough to consider what the transformed shape will be.

There are some quirky parts to this scripture passage too - did anyone else notice while Ben was reading, that when Simon Peter recognizes Jesus, he puts his clothes back on in order to swim to shore?? I would love to hear if any of you have a theological or cultural explanation as to why Simon Peter needed clothes on to swim - perhaps this miraculous moment has so discombobulated him that he responded with some confusion. Why were there specifically 153 fish? We'll save that for another sermon.

Regardless, it is a reminder that the Spirit's movement can be unexpected. It is a reminder that when things shatter and we try to bring the pieces back together, the results can surprise us all. Like a pitcher who reinvents himself, like a boy with multicolored clay, and like the disciples nets filled with fish, may we be surprised by the unfolding way that God moves in our midst, making beauty out of brokenness.

Perhaps we can be reminded of this very thing as we continue our own lives here in State College and beyond - especially when we arrive at moments where we feel ourselves cracked or broken.

May we be vessels, open to transformation and change.